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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000676

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FOR AF A/S FRAZER

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SL](#)
SUBJECT: SCENE SETTER FOR A/S FRAZER TRAVEL TO SIERRA LEONE
PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION

¶1. (U) The inauguration of President Ernest Bai Koroma is an important milestone in the recovery of Sierra Leone from years of conflict and upheaval. Your visit to this country at the time of peaceful transition from one elected administration to another is an opportunity to underscore U.S. commitment to democracy in Africa. Heads of state from a number of neighboring countries including Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia and Guinea will be attending, making the inauguration a regional celebration. The UK will be represented by Baroness Amos, former Secretary of State for International Development. The United Nations representative will be Assistant Secretary General for Peace Building Support, Carolyn McKaskie. Other countries sending delegations include Japan, Canada and, possibly, France.

Overview

¶2. (U) After a decades-long civil war, Sierra Leone has maintained a fragile peace since 2002. However, the conditions that lead to the war still prevail: high unemployment, lack of infrastructure and the population's perceptions of corruption. The venal and inept leadership of the previous government also stymied progress. During the recent national elections, Sierra Leoneans, tired of the lack of progress, overwhelmingly voted for change. The opposition All People's Congress (APC) won a parliamentary majority in August, and the opposition party's presidential candidate Ernest Bai Koroma, won a presidential run off held September 18. All observers lauded Sierra Leone on the conduct of the elections and hailed the transparent, relatively violence free process as a model for sub-Saharan Africa. The campaign period was marred by skirmishes between supporters of the rival candidates, but the Sierra Leonean Police were able to intervene effectively. Local elections are scheduled for mid-2008 and will be another important step in strengthening democracy in Sierra Leone.

¶3. (U) The new government will need to manage the voters, unrealistic expectations that change will happen within the first few months. In his speech following his September 17 swearing in, President Koroma pledged 'zero tolerance' for corruption. He reiterated this pledge during his address at the occasion of the opening of the new Parliament, Revitalizing the Anti-Corruption Commission will be a part of this effort. He also promised government encouragement of private sector development as this will drive the growth and employment that the country desperately needs. One immediate goal is the restoration of electricity to Freetown. Our U.S. goals reflect the priorities highlighted by the government goals under their Poverty Reduction Strategy and set forth in the President's parliamentary speech.

UNIOSIL and the Special Court

¶4. (U) The UN peacekeeping follow-on presence, UNIOSIL (United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone), has been very effective and, through strong leadership, has been extremely active in continuing the UN mandate to sustain peace and security. Sierra Leone garners a fair amount of international attention, and the UN has put the spotlight on the country by naming it as one of two (with Burundi) countries for Peace Building Commission (PBC) attention and it is eligible to benefit from the new Peace Building Fund (PBF) for rapid intervention "peace sustaining" activities. Funding so far has been directed at youth employment initiatives, security sector assistance, electoral funding, and support for the newly formed Human Rights Commission. The U.S. is currently the only major donor that has not contributed to the PBF, although evaluation of the PBC continues in order to determine potential needs the USG may fill in the future.

¶5. (U) The Special Court of Sierra Leone (SCSL), the war crimes tribunal charged with prosecuting those most responsible for the atrocities committed during the civil war is based in Freetown. Two completed trials have moved on to the appeals phase. For security reasons, the SCSL chose to use the International Criminal Court venue in The Hague to prosecute former Liberian President Charles Taylor. The SCSL is unique, as it relies solely on voluntary contributions and must constantly fund raise for operating expenses. We are the largest contributor, and have provided about \$48 million to date. The Taylor trial has been delayed and will reconvene on January 7, 2008 so we anticipate the court will extend into 2009, or even early 2010. In FY 2006, \$5.94 million in ESF for Sierra Leone bilateral assistance, which would have supported our assistance programs in agriculture, local

FREETOWN 00000676 002 OF 002

governance, diamond sector reform and media programs, was diverted to fund our contribution to the SCSL.

Bilateral Relations and Assistance

¶6. (U) Our relationship with Sierra Leone has been generally positive. We enjoy good access and respect for our views most of the time. We are considered a major bilateral donor, but the U.K. far outstrips others in terms of its support to the country. Under the previous government, corruption was endemic and impeded good governance and private sector reform. Our partnership with Sierra Leone seeks to bolster democratic growth through support for national and local elections, diamond sector reform and assistance to local governance at the district level. We also support opportunities for economic growth, particularly through the agricultural sector. Our efforts are in line with the GoSL's three- year Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), which runs from 2005-2007. Sixty percent of the national budget is donor funded, mostly through the EU and the UK. Sierra Leone received Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) relief status in late 2006 and we signed our debt cancellation agreement in June 2007.

Security

¶7. (U) The overall security situation in Sierra Leone, post election, is calm. However, there have been reports of sporadic politically motivated incidents, primarily assaults and intimidation tactics, which have occurred in several locations up-country. Violence emanating from ethnic and cross-cultural issues such as rights to chieftaincy and boundary disputes, especially in the rural regions, has also been the root cause of numerous incidents up-country. While people are remarkably resilient given the appalling infrastructure and lack of economic opportunity, various groups here have shown a willingness to lash out at any perceived injustices in the form of demonstrations, rioting,

clashes with police and even attacks on police stations in Freetown and the provinces. The immediate threat to safety and security continues to be crime and the likelihood of traffic accidents due to the abysmal road conditions. Criminal activity against westerners is rare, but remains a concern. There has been a noticeable decrease in the number of armed robberies since the presidential election, and encouraging sign considering the propensity of assailants to carry out robberies, home invasions and assaults without fear of retribution.

Press

18. (U) Post has prepared a Press Statement, which will be distributed to the print media on Tuesday, November 14 (copy to be forwarded). Post recommends the Assistant Secretary give one short interview with Cotton Tree News, a local radio organization which distributes material to stations nationwide, including UN Radio. Radio is the primary means by which Sierra Leoneans obtain information, and the Cotton Tree News will give broad, diverse coverage. Talking points will be prepared at post expressing our support for the new government and satisfaction at the anticipated success of the inauguration as well as a positive outcome of bilateral meetings. Please advise if this is acceptable.

Scenario/Schedule

19. (U) A scenario and schedule will be sent separately for review.

PERRY